

Guest Editorial

On Method, Technorealism and Aesthetic Capitalism

Patricia Ticineto Clough

In the introduction to a collection of essays discussing both Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida's writings, the editors, Paul Patton and John Potevi refer to Michel Foucault's well-known comment indicating that the 20th century perhaps one day would be seen as Deleuzian. I am particularly interested in the comment that Patton and Potevi report Deleuze made when asked to respond to Foucault's remark. As Deleuze put it: "He may perhaps have meant that I was the most naïve philosopher of our generation. In all of us you find themes like multiplicity, difference, repetition. But I put forward almost raw concepts of these, while others work with more mediation... Maybe that's what Foucault meant: I wasn't better than the others, but more naïve, producing a kind of *art brut*, so to speak, not the most profound but the most innocent philosopher (the one who felt the least guilt about 'doing philosophy.')

I begin with this story about Deleuze not merely to mark the influence that that generation of philosophers, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault's generation, has had on my work as a social theorist and cultural critic. Not your generation and not quite mine, that generation of philosophers already were becoming known intellectuals by the post-World War II years and thus they shared a certain readiness when the days of 1968 would turn out to be eventful for their unique elaborations of philosophy, indeed hardly recognized as such. Their writings might have been more readily recognized as the work of social theorists and cultural critics. Yet having been introduced to the English speaking academy through literary studies, art history, architecture, film, television, and new media criticism, it would be a circuitous route to recognition in the social sciences. Indeed, Deleuze who was translated into English mostly in the 1990's is still or only now receiving the attention of English speaking social scientists.

But if it were not only to point to the influence of these philosophers on my thinking as a social theorist and cultural critic, why else did I start as I did. It was to extend an invitation to you to be naïve, to be open to the creation of 'almost raw concepts,' to be social theorists and with less guilt to be philosophical, politically engaged, as a new generation of sociologists needs to be, no matter what

your focus of study comes to be. So first let me address what I mean in inviting you to be social theorists, even while not necessarily inviting you to specialize in sociological theory. By inviting you to become social theorists, I mean to encourage you to develop a critical capacity that can accompany you in whatever work you do as a sociologist. More specifically I mean to invite you to engage in on-ongoing exploration of the method with which you come to reading, writing, thinking, feeling, knowing. You might suspect that what I am proposing is about reflexivity, self-reflexivity or the exploration of a self through a self-consciousness, to take a personal or autobiographical turn in relationship to doing sociology, and there is something to that to which I will return. But actually I mean to provoke thought about autobiography in order to address something like the autobiography of sociology, what might better be called a genealogy of sociology's reflexivity, its consciousness and self-consciousness.

I want to point to what George Steinmetz has called sociology's "epistemological unconscious," a term he used in arguing that even though vigorously denied, sociology still is methodologically positivistic meaning that the play of various combinations of positivism, empiricism and scientism serves as sociological method's "center of gravity."² I am reminded too of Michel Foucault who pointed to the productivity of what he called a "positive unconscious of knowledge," arguing that the doing of a science is made possible by what cannot be thought in the terms of that science.³ So I hope to point to the importance of methodological considerations in producing a sociological imagination for our times —first by drawing out the implication of the disavowed operation of a methodological positivism in sociology while at the same time stepping back from long held assumptions about the opposition between the subjective and the objective in the often battled-over claims that something is unscientific in being merely subjective, on one hand, and on the other, that the claim to objectivity is merely a blind subjectivism without any accountability, especially political accountability, such that the claim to being non- political in work is often taken by others in fact to be political . I hope you will consider with me that these battles and reversals around subjective and objective are a visible trace on the surface of sociology's epistemological unconscious or its methodological positivism--a surface we might refer to as style or writing style. Actually although Steinmetz never fully discusses it, he does propose that scientism in the trio, positivism empiricism and scientism, refers to the style of presentation in Sociology, writing the surface of its epistemological unconscious.

So if I am suggesting, as I would like to do, that to rethink the sociological imagination means creating methodologies that are neither subjective nor objective, it is because I would like to remind you of the apparatuses of imagination, the apparatuses of the world production and distribution of imaginaries. The screens, machines and makers of dreams need interrogation as we are confronted with a technology or a new media technology that has reformulated presentational style or performativity and has done so as other media technologies have done in the past, each in its own way by deploying a literary realism. Now if realism is the style of presentation that produces a sense of reality existing outside our perception

of it or proposes that our perception is only a perspective on a given reality, then realism in the 18th century, at least in Europe, not only becomes the style of painting and literature—the realist novel for example arises in the late eighteenth century—but realism also becomes the presentational style of a positivist empiricism. It becomes and still is the style of Sociology through and beyond the post-World War II years of the Fordist/Keynesian era, when social science, privileges researchers' doing organized full fledged empirical studies, surveying populations to bring their practices in line with mass production and mass consumption.

In the post-World War II years, Steinmetz concludes: "the muting of capitalist crisis made it increasingly plausible that social practices really were repeatable in ways that could be captured by statistical models and replicable experiments."⁴ In investing in the production of the statistical personage or what was then called 'the generic American,' Sociology, in the post-World War II years, tightly tied sociality to the individual subject as a representative of the various statistical populations that Sociology created and that it allowed to stand in for what we refer to still as the social structural. Even C. Wright Mills who gives us a sociological imagination for his times by aiming criticism at the very kind of research Steinmetz is describing, would nonetheless use the statistical in pointing to the social structural and the historical: his used examples, as you remember, *such as if one man loses a job, if one couple gets divorced, you have a personal trouble but when the divorce rate is high or the unemployment rate is high, well then you have a social issue*, a social structure historical issue, written however in the discourse of rates and population statistics. As Sociology writes the structural in terms of statistical populations it displaces from the center of methodological considerations, critical theories of power/knowledge and the aesthetics of representational practices. And further because statistical populations are irreducible to individuals or even communities and are rather virtual or probabilistic assemblages, there is an urge if not a compulsion for Sociology to give a human face or figure to statistical populations, often through ethnographic portraiture or the case study such that Sociology by intention or by appropriation becomes more amenable to humanistic liberal or neoliberal policy and programming.

In this same context we might consider the relatively recent fate of identity politics—its morph into liberal and neoliberal multicultural policy and programming. We might think of the insistence of identity politics on the personal as political, thereby making demands for personal recognition especially from the state, which however had to be based on statistical or counted or accounted for populations. So the demand for human rights, for example, usually is articulated against statistical populations such as Blacks, Women, Queers, the incarcerated, the addicted, etc. but also populations of problems, such as poverty, disenfranchisement criminality, physical and mental incapacity. These two population series, brought together through statistics and personalized ethnographic portraiture and case study, can make it difficult to engage the critical theories I have already mentioned, concerning power/knowledge and the aesthetics of presentation, as matters of methodology or as a way to think critically of Sociology's place in what Foucault described as

biopolitics or the governmentality of liberalism and neoliberalism.

In the recently published English translations of his lectures of the late 1970's, Foucault both defines biopolitics as "this very specific albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge and apparatuses of security (or *dispositifs*) as its essential technical instrument," and he links biopolitics to neoliberal governance.⁵ Refusing that view of neoliberal governance as a matter of stripping away the state so as to free the economy to pursue its true expression, or what has been called deregulation, Foucault instead has proposed that regulatory activities of government have been hyperactive in neoliberalism. Or as he puts it: Neoliberalism should not be identified with *laissez faire*, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity and intervention. But this does not mean that neoliberal governance intervenes in the economy directly so much as governance secures the conditions of possibility of the market both by assisting in the calibration of the market's indeterminate and non-totalizable features to risk management and by inviting a crisis oriented sociality. These, a speculative economy of risk and a crisis-oriented sociality, have been especially marked in the state's participation in a production of suspicion and fear through a population racism applied for example in the war terrorism, immigrant deportation and detention, not to mention mass incarceration and reentry programming. All of which have led to the consolidation of apparatuses or *dispositifs* for organizing, assessing and investing life and death, understood biopolitically. So, if neoliberalism governs life and death it does so biopolitically, that is, it artificially optimizes the generativity of species life, or of nature generally, where species life however is taken up in terms of the probabilities or improbabilities of the life chances of statistical populations, where populations are not so much of human groups but populations of capacities, human capital measures, estimations of genetic potentiality, or environmental sustainability probabilities.

As these examples suggest biopolitical governance of life and death means the production and management of "specific aggregate effects of populations irreducible to a smaller frame."⁶ And it is through these aggregate effects that populations have economic effects that further induce the movement, or the activities of populations--the further circulation of these as probabilities. Here, what I referred to earlier as the human face or figure offered through ethnographic portraiture or case study serve not only to humanize populations when in fact they are not human but the human face and portraiture also help to integrate individual phenomena within a collective field in the form of quantification. This increasingly allows for a comparison of normalities instead of merely distinguishing between the normal and the abnormal. With the biopolitical governance of life and death, "the normative," Brian Massumi has argued undergoes rapid inflation, as classificatory and regulative mechanisms are elaborated for every socially recognizable state of being.... such that 'normal' is now free-standing, no longer the opposite and necessary complement of 'abnormal,' 'deviant,' or 'dysfunctional,' as it was under disciplinary power..."⁷ The biopolitical governance of life and death is less disciplinary, less concerned with producing subjects by inducing in them an adherence to the ideologies of the

nation-state. Or at least we might say, as Foucault does, that “populations are not to be seen from the standpoint of the juridical-political notion of subject, but as a sort of technical political object of management and government... dependent on a series of variables open to manipulation and modulation.”⁸

Populations also do appear in the guise of “publics,” that is, in the guise of “opinions” circulating in bodies of data.⁹ To be sure, publics are not *the* public imagined to be engaged in discourse about or argumentation over narrative knowledge with truth claims addressed to subjects of right. Publics rather point to a circulation of ways of doing things, ways of being, opinion addressed to an audience and not even a mass audience. And if here Foucault’s description of the circulation of publics and opinion already suggests something about the more contemporary situations of today’s media communication and information technologies, it also should be noted that the tension between publics and *the* public, between addressing subjects and circulating opinion among audiences already informed reading by the eighteenth century when the realist novel as well as newspapers becomes popular.

But what is different about the technology that is ours today is, for one, the havoc it has wrought on realism in that it is a technology of simulation, that is to say, the digital production of images can be without reference to reality. Or to put it a better way, digital imaging does not necessarily re-present; it does not even present copies. If literary realism was meant to create a sense of a given reality outside human perception, digital technology also is realist but it produces reality as simulation, as information flow, not as re-presentation or copy. As such, the digital image is in-forming: it touches and sounds, drawing attention and inviting participation through affective attunement.

Now affect is not to be understood first and foremost as emotion or named feelings. Rather it is the very capacity to be affected or to affect, the preconscious, pre-individual potentiality to act and be acted upon. Its truth is felt in terms of resonance or vibration across the dynamic matter of bodies and not only human bodies. What is asked in terms of truth is less what a body is and more what a body does or can do, can become, can become with other bodies. Affect refers to material processes of becoming without or outside human perception or consciousness, since it embodies other than human bodies only. But as for human bodies or in relationship to human bodies, digital technology’s vocation I would say is to be the body’s affective milieu, its sensational surface or skin and as such to function affectively below human perception at the infra empirical level of bodily proprioception. I am thinking on one hand of the ubiquity of information technologies or imaging that digitization has made possible, and on the other, the ongoing efforts to make digital technologies themselves able to simulate listening, touching, sounding, that is, for digital technologies to function as affective sensate bodies much more than cognitive subjects or artificial intelligences. I am also thinking of the more general affect of digital simulation on life sciences, on life itself in the continuing development of biotechnologies. And adding to that the rethinking in physics of energy matter as in-formational, there is a configuration of mathematics, physics, biology and digital simulation in terms of which realism and the empirical are being rethought inviting

us also to rethink sociological, measure and method.

To do so will require an imagination born of intense creativity. This may mean as I have been suggesting that we rethink the imaginary or the psyche altogether. Or to think the psychic or imaginary in terms of different techno-realisms. Each techno-realism fixes the psyche or imaginary in a way that allows them to take up what had to be hidden in the construction of reality, or what is referred to as of late as the social construction of reality, where each techno-realism both relies on and disavows the working of unconscious processes in a way that is befitting to each. So the cinema and television are different, different in relationship to the realism each produces and the unconscious each produces. And digital imaging also is different and its psyche is different but it is different in that digital imagining doesn't so much hide as function below consciousness, non-phenomenologically, in producing a realism of simulacra.¹⁰

Pointing to a material process or matter as dynamic process with out human perception, the psyche of the digital finds its place in relationship to measure and what has been described as the impossibility of measure in relationship to the time of affect or the before or beyond human perception of pure potentiality, an impossibility however that arises just at the very same time that digital is the technology that means to directly be effective below and beyond consciousness, to modulate or measure potentiality itself. So this is the problematic of politics in our time. And to put this problematic in play with economy, market, and governance, let me shift our focus a bit.

In her recent discussion of branding, Christine Harold suggests that rather than offering a mark of subject status attached to commodities, brand now makes things signs that exude and transmit affect or potentiality, befitting what she has called "aesthetic capitalism".¹¹ Brand then is meant to function affectively, to stir bodily propensities, or potentialities, to initiate activation through moods or feelings in relation to a political economy. This branding seeks to produce a surplus value of "audience effect" or affect in a political economy that embeds what Luciana Parisi and Steven Goodman have called "the mnemonic control" of a preemptive logic.¹² For Parisi and Goodman, the operation of pre-emption through branding seeks to remodel long term memory through an occupation of or the parasiting on the dynamics of short-term intuition or where past present and future coexist as affect or potentiality, which repeatedly instigates activation in the neurophysiological plasticity of the body-brain. Branding's occupation of short term intuitions is something like a distribution of memory implants, which provides you with the bodily or affective sense of an experience you haven't had or a memory you haven't had, giving a base for future activation or repetition. It is a potentiation or an activation however that means to foreclose actualization, collapsing potentiality back on itself producing a surplus of affect. Indeed, the power of preemptive logic therefore points to biopower or better beyond biopower Not just the governance of life and death but a move to that which is nonlived or proceeds or goes beyond life in order to modulate potentiality or affect-itself.

It is in relationship to these powers, gaining force in our present that, I want to

argue, that measure and therefore method are becoming aesthetic. And when I say measure and methods I mean the measures and methods that I have been talking about, those belonging to sociologists and governance alike where governance seeks its veridiction in its relationship to the conditions it provides for the market in managing life and affect – the market of aesthetic capitalism. Measure and method will become increasingly particular to its simulation not to a given reality. And therefore it will be a productive measure changing what measure is each time and what is measured each time and the units of measure each time. What goes by performance these days will become the norm and we will have to start soon inventing something beyond it or making more of it. By performance then I mean a turning of knowledge production into an affective modulation of an audience, an upping or downing of affect, a speeding or slowing of the affective register. This does not mean ignoring research or any means of collecting data; it means that presentation becomes more important, more central than it ever has been as a measure of truth.

¹ Patton, Paul and John Protevi (eds.) 2003. *Between Deleuze & Derrida*. New York: Continuum, 6.

² Steinmetz, George. 2005. "The Epistemological Unconscious of U.S. Sociology and the Transition to Post Fordism: The Case of Historical Sociology". In *Remaking Modernity Politics, History and Sociology*, edited by Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Orloff. Durham: Duke University Press, 119.

³ Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon Books, xi.

⁴ Steinmetz, 129.

⁵ Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population, Lectures at the Collège De France 1977-1978*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, p.108.

⁶ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 104

⁷ Massumi, Brian. 1998. "Requiem for Our Prospective Dead: Toward a Participatory Critique of Capitalist Power". In *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*, edited by E. Kaufman and K. Jon Heller. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 57.

⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 70.

⁹ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 75.

¹⁰ It should be noted that what is called social constructionism usually does not see the working of the unconscious in it. For further discussion on this disavowal in relationship to technorealism see my *End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism*. New York: Lang Publishing (1998).

¹¹ Harold, Christine. 2009. "On Target: Aura, Affect, and the Rhetoric of 'Design Democracy'". In *Public Culture* no. 21, 611.

¹² Parisi, Luciana and Steve Goodman. Forthcoming 2011. "Mnemonic Control". In *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse. Durham: Duke University Press.

